



FURY and SOUND

By Roby Wentz

"SOMEWHERE in the radio business there may be a more stupid, insensitive collection of people, but I doubt it. Roachler has asked for *tender* ad libs—not the Fulton fish market. "Your butchering—"

The actors, musicians and technicians in the rehearsal studio stood

silent under the tirade. The orchestra men stared at their music-stands; the cast kept their eyes on their scripts; the sound effects man inspected his bells and whistles.

Charles Fowler, assistant producer, was less fortunate. His eyes remained fixed on the control booth and hence on the author of the tongue-lashing.

Based on a radio script originally written for the CBS radio program *Suspense*.

By Robert E. Lee & Irving Reis

Fowler's face was blank of expression. Script in hand, he waited, eyes on the small, ugly man with an abnormally large head, crouched over the rehearsal mike behind the thick glass window. The rasping voice from the talk-back was "in sync" with the movements of the sneering lips.

"Roachler would further like to remind the sound effects man, for the seventh time," the talk-back blared on, "that he wishes the rain effect to *sneak* in after the bridge music, not *crash* in. And would the *talented* assistant producer, *Mister Fowler*, get word to the musicians that *pianissimo* means *softly*?"

Charles Fowler's face was a mask.

"And now, if it won't interfere with anyone's more important business, may Roachler proceed with his rehearsal? *Thank you*. Ad libs, please."

His face unchanging, Fowler nodded at the group of extras. They broke into their brief lines.

"Good-bye." "Take time to write, Johnny." "Drop me a postcard from Paris."

One of Fowler's eyebrows went up, and a sugary phrase of "bridge" music seeped from the violins. The sound effects man, eyes on the "mixer" in the booth, caught the signal and poured a stream of fine gravel down his tin trough—rain.

Fowler pointed a finger at a girl in a black dress, and she moved up to the mike. "Dear Diary," she began, "how can I tell you what my own heart cannot say . . .?" The

sentimental lines crooned on in throaty tones.

With the crack of a pistol shot, a music-stand slipped in its adjustable sleeve. The girl stopped in mid-sentence. So did the musical background. Almost palpably, muscles tensed, faces stiffened.

The talk-back activated with a click.

"Roachler has worked with insensitive asses in many places and under many conditions, but he is forced to yield top honors to the radio artists of California!" The shrieking voice verged on a note of hysteria. "How can this girl perform these sensitive thoughts against the opposition of your noise and indifference? How can these fragile dreams, crystallized through nights of creative sweat, compete with your gum-chewing, chair-creaking, walking-talking, thick-skinned detachment? How can . . ."

Fowler spoke into the studio mike. "I'm sorry, King. It was my fault. I tried to adjust the stand and give the cues at the same time, and . . ."

"Mister Fowler honorably confesses!" If possible, the voice was more scathing. "Roachler has employed Mister Fowler for three years. His principal function is to run my errands, reflect my thoughts, do the unimportant trivia of producing for radio." The voice dripped contempt. "In the fullest sense, Mister Fowler is an extension of Roachler's brain. But he still has not evolved a satisfactory method of doing his work without kicking the studio down."

Fowler looked at his tormentor.

"Look, King—how about holding that up until the cast leaves?"

"Well!" The small, ugly man's eyebrows shot up the domed forehead. "Roachler seems at long last to have located a sensitive zone in Mister Fowler! We'll break for dinner, now, and anyone else who feels that Roachler's work, which seems to interest a mere fourteen million listeners, is too dull to warrant their entire attention, can be paid off now."

He turned his back on the mike and disappeared through the control booth door. The tension broke in the studio. People spoke freely. Music-stands clattered; scripts crackled. The personnel of "ROACHLER PRESENTS" straggled out to dinner.

Fowler did not move. Taking a pencil from his pocket, he began jotting notes on the margin of his script as the studio emptied around him.

"How did my performance sound, Charley?"

Fowler raised his eyes. The girl whose speech his miscue had interrupted stood before him. She was small, with cloudy black hair, a sullen, provocative mouth done in cherry-black lipstick and a figure that stopped just short of voluptuousness.

"Okay, I guess." His voice was toneless.

"You guess?"

"All right. I'll tell you. It seemed a little corny to me."

Sparks jumped in the smoldering dark eyes. "It didn't seem corny to King. Naturally, he only gets two thousand a week for running the show."

Fowler reached for his coat, shrugged his shoulders into it. "If you want apples polished, don't send 'em to me."

"You're getting more impossible to live with every day!" The girl's sulkiness took flame. Fowler's gaze seemed to search her face before he answered.

"Let's not start another of those cycles, dear. So Roachler thinks you're the greatest actress in the world. So he's the guy you have to sell. So he's sold. So you're all set."

"Jealous . . . Charley?"

"No. Why?"

Her laughter bubbled. "You are! In five years of being married to you, Charley, I thought I'd seen every facet of your fine art of being disagreeable, but jealousy's a new one."

"Fine. Let it go at that."

"Oh, no. If you're going to be jealous, Charley, I'll give it something to feed on. Would it make you any more jealous to know that I'm on my way to dinner with King to discuss my performance?" She watched to see if the barb took effect.

"Tell him hello for me."

She laughed again. "Oh, I will, darling." Her full lips twisted. "King tells me he's found a marvelous new place for dinner. It's *very* private. 'Bye.'

She was gone. Fowler sat down in a canvas chair. He put one hand to his forehead. For a moment, only. But the fingers trembled a little as he reached for a cigarette. With the match lit, he remembered studio rules, blew it out, made a half-movement

of irritation.

"Aren't you going out to eat, Charley?"

Fowler started slightly. "Eh . . .?"

"Aren't you going to eat tonight?"

Fowler turned to see Van Meter, the sound effects technician, regarding him with a friendly smile. He carried a lunch pail in his hand.

Fowler tried to smile back. "I—wasn't hungry, Van. Gotta mark up these scripts, anyway."

"Hell, you can't live without eating." Van Meter, a gangling red-head with a crop of freckles on his skinny forearms, sat down and opened the lunch box. There were neat stacks of sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper, an orange, chocolate-topped cupcakes. "Here, I'll split with you. Ham on rye—how's that? Barbecued, too. Fixed this ham myself. Better than the ham we cook up here at work." He shot a sly look at Fowler. Fowler grinned crookedly.

"Got a barbecue pit in my own back yard in Glendale," Van Meter went on. "I can do a lot of things besides ring bells and pour sand into a bucket, Charley."

Fowler stripped the waxy paper from around a sandwich, bit into it; the pink, flaking ham, with taste overtones of barbecue sauce, was delicious.

Chewing, he leaned back in the canvas chair. "Jeez, Van—it's good, at that. Don't you eat out on the job, here?"

"Why should I? My wife's the best cook in the world. I couldn't get out of the house without a lunch. Packs

it for me the first thing every morning. Have some coffee. Reach yourself one of those Dixie cups."

They chatted, about people and things, not about their work. Fowler took another sandwich. He found himself laughing a little at something Van had said. Over the second cup of coffee they were silent a moment, and Fowler laughed again—a short bark.

"What's the joke?"

"No joke," said Fowler. "It just struck me, Van. You're a happy man."

"Me? We-ell, maybe so, at that. Never thought about it just that way."

"Your wife loves you, you've got your house in Glendale and your back yard and your barbecue pit. You're independent. When your time's up here, you pick up your lunch box and get the hell out, home to your wife and your yard. Independent."

Van Meter grinned. "You ought to write scripts, Charley. Quite a speech, that."

"Didn't mean it to be. It just happened to strike me, all at once, how different it is with me. Me and my pet genius."

"Yeah," the sound man nodded. "That must be rugged, Charley."

"If it was only the time I spend with him here in the studio," said Fowler. "But when we finally call it a day here, that's just the beginning. We go home and it keeps right on."

"You live with him?"

Fowler grimaced wryly. "Yeah. When we came out here from New York to launch this new show, he

took a house in Benedict Canyon, away back in the hills, and insisted Merle and I move in with him."

"Merle?"

"My wife."

Van exclaimed. "The gal in the cast?"

"Sure."

Van whistled. "No disrespect, old boy. You're doin' all right."

"Thanks."

"So you live with him?"

"Well, he insisted on it, practically. 'For the good of the show'. So we could 'talk things over at night.' Cozy."

Van exhaled slowly. "Yeah, *Very* cozy. You know," he went on, in a light tone, "it's funny about these wonder-boys."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, in my capacity of plain and fancy maker of noises, I've seen a steady parade of these boy geniuses come and go. In the early stages they go in for Indian bracelets, sweat-shirts, beards. That's the first manifestation. Later they develop another characteristic, an acute sensitivity to sounds. After awhile they even hear things that aren't there. Like that rain effect of mine this afternoon."

"What about it?"

"Well, after Roachler bawled me out for the fifth time about the effect being too loud, I just let one bridge go by and I *didn't even run the sand down the trough*. He still yelled that it was too loud!"

Fowler's eyes puckered thoughtfully. "That sounds impossible."

"Not to a connoisseur in geniuses

like me. It's a standard stage in the evolution of the wonder boy species. They grow more and more hysterical from there on. Then, just about the time a psychopathic hospital starts warming up four guys with white coats and a canvas T-shirt for a new customer—what happens? Why, the movies discover the genius. So they pay a thousand dollars a week more for his particular brand of paranoia than he can make in radio, only in a quieter setting."

Fowler nodded. "They *have* been after him on a movie deal."

Van stood up and brushed crumbs off his trouser-legs. "They better step on it. This time it's gonna be a close race between the talent scouts and the four white coats." He stuffed papers into the lunch box and snapped it shut. "Yup, he's got the occupational disease of radio geniuses. Newspapermen get the shakes, movie producers get ulcers, bank presidents jump out of windows. But the wonder boys of the kilocycles get open nerves in their ear-drums."

"Let's take a smoke." They went outside and Fowler offered his pack of cigarettes. They lit up and Fowler exhaled and said, "Yeah . . . sometimes I think it's happening to me."

"Could be, if you stay in the racket long enough. Stands to reason—radio is sound, nothing else. The more sensitive your ears are, the better radio man you'll be—up to a point, anyway."

"I read somewhere," Fowler said musingly, "that if everyone's hearing was increased ten percent, we'd all

go nuts."

Van laughed triumphantly. "You took it right out of my mouth, Charley. There's a whole vast world of fantastic, unimaginable sound roaring away just below the threshold of our hearing. Take this studio for example. They say it's soundproof. Throw away your smoke and we'll go back in for a minute, and I'll show you something."

The doors closed behind them.

"Listen," Van said. "Hear anything?"

After a moment of silence, Fowler shook his head. "Nothing."

"Now see what happens."

From his pocket, Van produced a tiny black thing with long wires and a plug dangling from it. Swiftly, a quiet smile on his face, he unplugged a floor-mike and plugged in the tiny gadget.

"That's a contact mike, isn't it?" Fowler said curiously.

"Right. But this is something a little special. 'It's the most sensitive thing in the line of an 'electrical ear' that science knows about. You might call it a 'sound microscope.'"

"It's certainly little enough."

"Small but potent. Look, I'll press it against the wall of the studio. Like so." He suited the action to the word. "Charley," he called, "will you turn up the volume on that amplifier?"

Fowler gave the knob a tentative twist—and flinched, as the studio became a bedlam of noise—street-traffic, trolley-bells, klaxons, squealing brakes mingled with boomy, bass voice-sounds from somewhere, clump-

ing footsteps, hissing air.

"Hey!" shouted Van, "Not so loud! I told you it was sensitive!"

Fowler spun the knob and the sound dwindled to a murmur. "My God!" he said in a drained voice.

"See what I mean?" the technician said, grinning. "Can you imagine what would happen to the geniuses if the movies didn't rescue 'em?"

"Even a genius hasn't got a microphone in his ears," said Fowler slowly.

"Hasn't he?" Van dropped his treasure in his pocket. "Guys like Roachler live in a world of sound. Mr. R. gets two grand a week to sit in that glass fish bowl and just listen. Weighing sounds. His ears are his stock in trade. The nerve endings in the ear drums get more and more sensitive. When his hearing becomes as acute as this contact mike's—he won't be able to stand it. Then, in come the white coats."

"Where do you get one of those things?" asked Fowler casually.

"This contact mike?"

"Yeah."

"Built it myself. Look at it." He tossed it to Fowler. The assistant producer turned it over in his hands.

"That's the works," said Van.

"Yeah," commented Fowler. "Pretty neat."

The doors swung open and a trio of trumpet-players walked in, talking loudly.

Fowler handed the microphone to the sound effects man. "Thanks for showing it to me," he said casually. "Thanks very much."

"FAREWELL, my love . . ."

Merle's voice, dripping corn, sighed into the mike. "Good night across the latitudes and longitudes of space and time. Farewell across the hours and the days, the mountain peaks and the plains between, the darkness and the sun. You are with me here because Love is here."

The orchestra came up with a triumphant chord that was half-drowned in a sea of terrific applause from the studio audience.

The announcer stepped to his microphone. "You have just heard another original by Roachler in the series 'ROACHLER PRESENTS.' It was produced, written and directed by Mr. Roachler, who also suggested the musical theme. Next week Roachler, acclaimed as the most imaginative dramatist in radio, will—but let radio's foremost producer tell you about it himself. Ladies and gentlemen, KINGSLEY ROACHLER!" He swung a finger at Roachler. The little man, his gnomelike appearance accentuated by the thick glasses, came to the mike.

"Roachler speaking," he said crisply. "Next week Roachler fans will hear a vivid contrast to tonight's romantic theme. It is a drama fraught with social significance entitled 'Farewell to Apes.' What would happen if an ape . . ." He sketched in the idea. "Until next week, then," he finished, "Roachler says good night. Roachler will be pleased if you return to hear another 'ROACHLER PRESENTS!'"

The music danced into a gay march

as the crowd pushed for the exits and curtains swung across the proscenium. Roachler sauntered over to Fowler, standing in the wings.

"It was one of the most impressive shows of the series, in my opinion—don't you think so, Charley?"

"You should know," Fowler said shortly.

Roachler caught Merle's eye and smiled at her, and Fowler caught the exchange of looks.

"It would have been a more polished production," the virtuoso went on, carelessly, "if you hadn't botched up the music cues. In three places they were distinctly sluggish. I've told you a thousand times, *watch me*—"

"Save it," said Fowler.

"—and pay attention," Roachler continued. Then he stopped short. "*What did you say, Charley?*"

"I said 'save it,'" answered Fowler. "I could tell you something else to do with it, too. I'm through."

"Through what . . . ?"

"Through being your whipping-boy. Better find yourself another one just as dumb as I am."

Roachler rallied quickly.

"Charley! I can't believe it! You didn't say it. No, I've erased it from my mind."

"Scribble it right back again, then," Fowler said brutally. "I'm finished."

Roachler saw people halt, curious faces watching. He pulled Fowler into an ante-room, shut the door. "You don't know what you're saying. The realist in me says 'It's possible'. Anything is possible in this vast dis-

tortion called life. But the artist in me is shocked, Charley."

Fowler stood stony-faced.

"You and Merle have been like brother and sister to me," Roachler purred smoothly, laying a hand on Fowler's arm. The thick spectacles concentrated his gaze on Fowler's hard features. "I've labored to groom *you* to be a great producer, too, Charley—brought Merle to the verge of a great acting career . . ."

"If it hadn't been for Merle, I'd have walked out a year ago."

"Charley! I bleed! I can understand when these dolts, actors, technicians, fiddlers, misunderstand my sensitivity, these little moods brought on by the searing creative fire! But you, an artist in your own right—"

The door opened and Merle came into the room. "What's all the glaring about?" She stared from one to the other. She was still in the gown she had worn for the broadcast, a lithe, provocative thing in black, shaped to her figure, slit high along one well-turned leg.

"Charley wants to quit the show," said Roachler.

She laughed. "Don't mind him," said Charles Fowler's wife scornfully. "He's tired. He'll forget it in the morning. Coming, King?"

"Charley—" began Kingsley Roachler.

"Skip it," said Fowler. He walked past them out of the room, out of the studio, to the parking lot where his car stood, got in, and started the engine.

"You shouldn't ought to gun her

that way, starting up cold, Mr. Fowler," said the attendant. "Scores the cylinders." He stared after the convertible as it roared across the lot and lurched into the street, through a red light.

"What do you s'pose is eatin' him, Bill?" he asked his co-worker.

"Ah, these radio guys are all nuts," opined Bill.

THE hands on the clock beside the bed stood at four A.M. as the key turned in the lock in the front door. Fowler lay on the bed in his clothes, eyes wide open. He heard the door open and close, softly. Roachler's voice said something, and Merle laughed—an intimate, caressing sound, with a sensual undertone. Roachler was talking again. They both laughed softly. Followed a period of complete silence lasting for several minutes, and then Fowler heard footsteps climbing the stairs, heard good-nights spoken, and Merle's step approaching the bedroom door. The light clicked on.

"Oh . . . you're still awake."

"Do you know what time it is?" asked Fowler from the bed.

Her quick glance took in the situation. "Objection . . . ?"

"Oh, no. No objection. I'm just your husband. I was just thinking how tired you get around ten-thirty when I suggest you and I going out alone."

"Do I always have to go out with you?"

"Come on to bed."

She flung aside the black dress and

whirled on him. "Don't tell me what to do!" She shook her cloud of dark hair angrily. "I'm buzzed to the ears with you, Charley, I might as well admit it. Let's wash it up right now, like adults."

"It's just me, of course."

"Just you."

"Roachler doesn't have a thing to do with it."

"Of course not. The point is, Charley, we don't get along any more. Why not stop trying?"

"All right . . . let's," said Fowler tonelessly.

She smiled. "That's the way to talk, Charley. Be sensible. Look. We'll finish this series of shows and I'll run up to Reno and get a divorce. No upsets or hard feelings. Just good friends."

"Okay," Fowler got up and started to undress.

FOWLER almost collided with Van Meter in the studio hallway before he recognized him. "Why, hello, Van!" He seemed about to hurry on. "Say!" He snapped his fingers. "Glad I met you. You know that gimmick you showed me the other day—that contact mike? I'd like to borrow it a few days. I want to work out some sound effects for next week's show."

"Why, sure." Van Meter fished in his pocket. "Got it with me. Here."

"Swell." Fowler slipped it into his own jacket. "I may need it for a couple of weeks, Van."

The sound man waved a hand. "Keep it as long as you like. All you have to do is hook it up to a record-

player."

"Thanks a lot, Van!"

The doctor in the Vine Street office building shook a waggish head at Fowler. "You radio fellows!" he said. "How do you expect to sleep when you're so tense all the time? Well, this ought to do the business. Take two envelopes of these powders just before retiring, and you'll sleep. Oh, by the way . . ."

Fowler paused on his way out.

"Yes, doctor . . ."

"Watch the dose. Too much can be dangerous."

"How much?"

"Anything over three of 'em. You'll only need two."

It was after eleven when he let himself into the apartment that evening. Merle was alone, chain-smoking.

"Where's King?"

"He went to bed." She ground out her cigarette. "I'm jumpy."

"We both need sleep," Fowler said. "Let's get to bed ourselves." His voice was casual. "I've been having trouble sleeping lately. Saw a doctor today and got some sleeping powders. What say we both give ourselves a break?"

"Sure. Fix me a slug."

In the bathroom, Fowler dissolved three of the powders in a glass of water. He filled another glass with plain water.

When he turned off the tap, it continued to drip in to the washbowl. He went into the bedroom and handed a glass to Merle. "Drink up."

"Here's to sleep." They drained their glasses.

In bed, a few minutes later, she spoke sleepily. "Charley . . .?"

"What?"

"Will you turn off that water tap—the one that's dripping?"

"It leaks. You can't make it stop."

"Oh, well . . . the devil with it."

Fowler lay beside her until her breathing grew slow and regular. Occasionally she snored a little. He raised himself on one elbow, shook her slightly.

"Merle?" he said, in a normal voice. There was no answer.

Fowler got up, and went into the bathroom.

KINGSLEY ROACHLER woke up, eyes wide open and staring. He gazed around at the familiar, dusky room. He jumped from bed and ran to the open window. Outside, the brush-covered canyon hillside lay silent in the dim starlight.

He was turning back toward the bed when the sound struck again . . . an incredible, metallic note, like the plucking of a cosmic fiddle-string over the crash of a supernatural gong, menacing, apocalyptic.

He uttered an involuntary cry and clapped his hands to his ears.

The vast sound came at him again, and it seemed that the house walls swelled with it. With an inarticulate scream, Roachler ran out of the room and down the hallway. He wrenched at a door, threw it open.

"Charley! Merle!"

"What's trouble, King?" Fowler's

voice was drugged and sleepy.

"That—that sound! Like a faucet dripping, magnified a million times!"

"Don't know . . ." Fowler seemed struggling to wake up. "May be a tap leaking somewhere."

"No . . . like a bomb exploding. Listen!"

"I can't hear a thing, King."

There was no more sound—only the muted, normal night noises of the hills.

Roachler passed a hand over his eyes. "It's gone. Why—you could hear it all over the place!"

"You must have been dreaming. It didn't wake either Merle or myself." Fowler lay down again. "Try to go to sleep, King."

"But I *know* I heard something. Don't try to tell me—"

"I'm tired, King. Good-night."

Roachler stood a moment in uncertainty. "Yeah . . . I—I guess it was a dream. You're sure you didn't . . ."

"Oh, hell, King. You're getting jumpy. Go to bed."

"Yeah. I dreamed it; I guess. Good-night, Charley."

VAN METER came up to Fowler during a break, next day. "Notice anything about the maestro this afternoon?" he asked.

Fowler looked at him. "Should I?" he queried.

The sound man raised his eyebrows. "My gosh, I should think anyone would. He's actually been polite to a couple of people. Seems—oh, I don't know; he seems worried about something."

"Probably having an off-day. How's the little home getting along, Van?"

"Swell. Lotta work, though. I'm putting up insect-screens, tonight after work. What with hot weather, the mosquitoes are getting bad."

"Insects," said Fowler.

"What?"

"Oh . . . I said yes, the insects are bad."

He watched Roachler leave the studio after work. The producer brushed off the usual post-rehearsal conferences with network executives, advertising men and his staff, and disappeared.

Fowler found him sitting up in bed, pencilling a script, when he arrived at the Benedict Canyon house that night. The little man had swathed his oversize head in a huge towel; the thick folds enclosed his ears, accentuating his naturally grotesque appearance.

"What?" he said loudly, almost in the manner of a deaf person. "I can't hear you."

"If you'd take off that damned towel you could," shouted Fowler. "All I asked was, how are you?"

"What do you mean?" countered Roachler.

"You look bad," said Fowler.

"I'm all right," said Roachler. "My ears hurt a little, is all. Damn odd."

"Well, good-night," shouted Fowler.

"Good-night."

After a time Roachler laid the script aside, took off the towel, switched out the light, and tried to

sleep, but sleep refused to come. He was twitching in a fitful doze when something broke the night silence in the room. Roachler stopped twitching and lay still. The sound was a faint, ominous whining, a steady, high-pitched hum that set nerves on edge like the sounds of a band-saw on a pine knot.

Roachler sat bolt upright in bed. As he did so, the high, singing whine grew into a scream, rising and falling, the sound of a squadron of diving fighter-planes. Behind the screaming, dull, vibrating blows suggested heavy bodies striking against thin, metallic surfaces. The terrifying manifestation was inside the room, outside the room, throughout the house.

Kingsley Roachler uttered a high, agonized shriek, as though in pain. His hands went to his ears.

The sound ceased.

Quivering, the little man sank back among the pillows, his hands still on his ears. He moaned softly. Finally he was quiet.

Like a blast from a choir of demoniac clarinets, the sound was with him again, shaking the walls, rattling a teacup on the bedside table.

Kingsley Roachler leaped from bed, sobbing, ran out the door and down the hall. He rushed into Fowler's room.

"Charley! Charley!"

"What's the matter, King?" Fowler's voice was sleepy and a little irritated.

The sound was gone.

"Will you come into my room?" Roachler's voice vibrated like a saw-

blade as he fought to keep it calm.

"Okay, keep your shirt on." Fowler got into a robe and slippers and followed Roachler down the hall. "What is it—another brainstorm for the show?"

"It's the same thing I had trouble with last night. You heard it, of course."

"Are you hearing noises again?"

Roachler was almost pleading. "Don't tell me you slept through that!"

"Don't shout at me!"

"Please, Charley. I—I must be getting a little jumpy. I didn't mean to shout. Listen, Charley—didn't you hear a buzzing, whining sound, something like a mosquito buzzing against a screen, only louder. Enormously louder! It shook the walls!"

"You'd better switch your brand, King." Fowler lit a cigarette.

"You're deaf! Merle—she must have heard it."

"She's sleeping like a baby."

Roachler stood irresolutely a moment. "Charley," he said, "get dressed and get out the car. I'm going to see a doctor."

"You think that's smart?"

"Why not . . . ?"

"Well, what do you think a doctor will say when you try to convince him that you heard a mosquito buzzing so it shook the walls of your room? Or that a dripping water-faucet sounds like exploding bombs to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well . . ." Fowler shrugged. "I've often wondered what would happen

to a man if his hearing became too sensitive . . . if he heard too much. He could never find rest or quiet. Eventually, I suppose, he'd blow his top."

"I—I *do* have very sensitive hearing."

"Sure." Fowler laughed lightly. "So sensitive that you're hearing things that aren't there. I wonder how long you'd have a sponsor if they knew the shape you're in?"

"I'm in perfect shape!" There was a high note of alarm in Roachler's voice.

"Glad to hear it."

"I've been working too hard, that's all. I just need a little rest."

"Well . . ." Fowler was resigned. "I'll get the car out and drive you to the hospital."

"No! No!" Roachler seized his arm. Fowler stood looking down at the little man. "I'll be all right, Charley. Go on back to bed."

Fowler shrugged again. "Whatever you say. But I'm getting a little tired of being waked up every night about your 'noises'. Good-night,"

"**C**HARLEY!" Roachler's voice was carefully restrained, but the undertone of terror in it was clearly audible. He stood in Fowler's doorway, the following night. The clock-hands stood at two A.M.

"What is it, King?"

"I—I've got a terrific idea for next week's show, Charley. Come into my room and see if it tweaks you."

"Okay." Fowler followed him through the doorway. "Go ahead—

shoot."

Roachler sat down. "Well, there's this French girl. She's escaped from the Nazis, and—" The man's hands shook as he tried to light a cigarette. Fowler took no notice. "Charley, how far are we from Sunset Boulevard?"

"Sunset? Oh, about a mile and a half, I guess."

"We couldn't hear traffic—automobiles gunning their motors, brakes squealing, horns—that distance, could we?"

Fowler stared at him and Roachler colored under the look.

"I couldn't," said Fowler, after a pause.

"Yeah. Well, this gal's a painter and she falls in love with a—y'know Charley, I get these ideas in the middle of the night, and I like to talk 'em out before I forget 'em. I'll tell you—why don't you bunk in here with me for awhile?"

After a pause, Fowler said flatly, "Seems sort of silly."

"Please, Charley!" His voice almost broke. "Roachler needs you, Charley." And when Fowler regarded him coldly, he added humbly, "I need you, Charley."

"I'll bed down here, if you want it that way," said Fowler shortly.

"**Q**UIET!" rasped the voice. "Roachler insists on complete quiet! Will you please stop your insufferable scuffling and scraping and babbling until called upon to utter your required sounds?"

Charles Fowler, in shirt-sleeves, script in hand, let his arms fall to his

sides. He kept his gaze on the gnome-headed figure in the control booth.

Roachler's face was suffused with heavy red. Through the thick glass, the prominent veins on his forehead were clearly visible.

"Right back in the groove!" murmured Van Meter.

"Roachler heard that remark!"

The silence was complete.

"The man who made that statement is hereby discharged!" The producer's voice vibrated like a tuning-fork.

"But, King, you can't fire Van," said Fowler. "He isn't working for you. The studio pays him."

"Roachler cannot tolerate insubordination!" The little man screamed it. "May I remind you that Roachler is directing? I can replace anyone, do you understand, any—"

His throat seemed to constrict. Strangled gaspings issued from his mouth. His face went waxy pale and he slumped forward. The watchers in the studio saw his head strike the microphone, knock it over.

Fowler was the first into the control booth.

"What's the matter, King?"

The horrible stranglings ceased. Kingsley Roachler set his hands against the edge of the control-board and pushed himself upright.

"I—it's this noise. Noise . . . I've got to get away from it. I'm a little dizzy, is all . . . be all right after a bit . . ."

Merle stepped to his side. "There's a cot in my dressing room."

Fowler pushed her aside. "Dressing

room, hell. The place for him is at home! Leave everything to me." He glanced around, a slight smile on his lips. "Somebody call an ambulance. We'll go on with the rehearsal. The show's going right ahead!"

"I'VE GOT to hand it to you, Charley; you didn't louse up the broadcast after all."

They were at home after the show. Merle began pulling off her long black gloves.

"Thanks." Fowler was tight-lipped.

"Say . . ." Merle eyed him curiously. "You're white as a sheet yourself Charley. Anything wrong?"

"Damn it, no! Why should there be?"

"Well, after all! I was only asking. How's King?"

Fowler sat down. "Resting."

"What does the doctor say?"

"He doesn't want a doctor."

"That's insane!" Merle stepped to the telephone. "I'm going to call a doctor." She was picking up the phone when Fowler crossed the room in two strides and snatched the instrument from her.

"He doesn't want a doctor! Is that clear?"

She stared at him. "Charley, are you all right . . .?"

Fowler smiled. "Just a little on edge, what with everything, I guess. Well—how about our usual sleeping powder, to make it all pass away smoothly? Hm?"

The girl shook her head. "I don't think so. I've been waking up sort of fogged . . ."

"You will take the sleeping powder!"

He was standing before her, features taut, eyes burning. She recoiled a step. "Charley . . .!"

"I've got to get rest, tonight! How can I, if you're going to be twisting and tossing—"

"I'm not taking any, is that clear? Say, what's this all about, anyway?" Her eyes narrowed. "This sleeping powder business was *your* idea from the first. Why are you so anxious to have me take it?"

Fowler was in the bathroom. He came out with a glass of water. "Drink it!" he gritted, thrusting it at her.

The girl's eyes widened at sight of the look on his face. In a movement of sudden panic, she struck the tumbler out of his hand; it crashed to the floor.

"How do I know what's in it . . .?" She tried to get past him. "Kingsley! King . . . help—"

Fowler's short-arm punch stopped her in the middle of a step. Her body stiffened in grotesque rigidity for a split second. Fowler's second blow caught her in that position and hurled her against the glass-topped dressing-table. She slumped against its frilly "skirt."

Fowler ripped her blouse open, jammed the little black thing into her pink-net bra. The small, black wires trailed from her breast across the floor . . .

He stepped to the cabinet in the corner and worked swiftly for a moment.

At first the throbbing was something suggested, rather than heard—a deep, distant thudding in a queer, double meter — thump-ta-THUMP, thump-ta-THUMP, thump-ta-THUMP . . . It swelled, increased in volume, marched closer . . . THUMP-ta-THUMP! . . . THUMP-ta-THUMP! . . . THUMP-ta-THUMP! . . . like the reason wrecking throbbing of an inhuman ju-ju drum that broke through walls, ear drums, sense itself.

"Charley . . .!"

The scream was an animal cry of distilled, fine-drawn agony. It rang through the house. Almost before it sounded, Fowler was in Kingsley Roachler's room.

"What is it, King? What's wrong?"

The little figure of the genius of radio lay full length on the bedroom carpet. His hands, white-knuckled, clutched his ears.

"Stop it, Charley, for God's sake, stop it!"

The inhuman drum-beats rattled the furniture.

"Stop what, King?"

"That throbbing! It's driving me insane!" He was gasping between sobs. "My head, Charley—oh, my head . . .! It's a heart-beat, Charley. It's my own heart—beating, pounding. Can't you hear it, Charley? Say that you—hear it—Charley . . ."

Fowler was smiling. "Hear what, King? I don't hear a thing."

THUMP-ta-THUMP! THUMP-ta-THUMP! THUMP-ta-THUMP!

With one high, shrill cry, Kings-

ley Roachler leaped to his feet and rushed from the room.

"Quiet—quiet—quiet . . .!" His despairing cry trailed back from the hallway, from the stairway. A door was wrenched open downstairs.

The horrible sonic hammer pounded on. Fowler continued to smile. He stood in the middle of Kingsley Roachler's bedroom without moving.

From below came a single, shattering detonation.

Only then did Charles Fowler move. Stepping to the telephone at Roachler's bedside, he spun the dial.

"Police," he said, and waited. "Police? This is Charles Fowler speaking, 3141 Benedict Canyon Lane. Kingsley Roachler has just committed suicide . . . Yes, the same Roachler. Shot himself. Yes, I'll be here. What sound? I don't know."

He hung up and walked over to a wall cabinet. He opened the polished wood doors, reached inside, and came out with a decanter. Into a small glass with the initials KR on it, he splashed whiskey, drank it off, poured more whiskey, drank again.

THUMP-ta-THUMP, THUMP-ta-THUMP . . . Charles Fowler started to pour another drink.

THUMP-ta-THUMP, THUMP-ta . . . The pounding stopped.

The decanter remained poised above the glass. Charles Fowler stood silent in the silent house; very gently, he set down the decanter. Very deliberately, he walked down the hallway.

Merle lay crumpled where she had fallen, against the dressing table. Her dark eyes were wide open; she seem-

ed to be staring at him.

"Merle!" shouted Fowler.

Her eyes stared on, unwaveringly. Fowler fell on his knees alongside his wife and shook her. "Merle! Merle!" There was no change in either the expression or direction of the dark eyes' gaze. He jammed his ear against her heart. When he straightened the look on his face was dazed, incredulous.

"Merle . . ."

Far down the canyon, he heard the siren, rising and falling, rising and falling in the steep gorge. Beneath it sounded the threatening drone of the racing motor. Charles Fowler's head sank against the dead girl's breast.

His shoulders shook. In front of the house, brakes squealed, and the siren moaned into silence. Footsteps drummed on the graveled path. The sharp blows of the knocker reverberated through the big house.

"Open up, in there!"

Fowler walked slowly into the bathroom. From the medicine chest he took six small envelopes, opened them one by one and poured the powder in them into a tumbler. Then he filled the tumbler with water and drank the mixture in it, turned, and walked from the bathroom to the head of the stairs leading to the first floor.

"Coming!" he called.



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